From East Texas to East Africa: Whitehouse nonprofit brings medical care, education to remote communities

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By Jennifer Scott

Motivated by a desire to show God's love through practical aid — including food, medical care and sustainable resources — Dr. John La Noue founded Amigos Internacionales in 1967.

Over the decades, the organization's humanitarian efforts have stretched from mobile medical clinics in the Rio Grande Valley to surgical camps and schools in East Africa.

"People called him 'Indiana Jones with a Bible and a skillet,'" said Michael Ryer, the organization's president and CEO.

What began as a short-term effort to provide mobile dental and medical clinics in the Rio Grande Valley evolved into an international humanitarian organization focused on addressing poverty, hunger, education, and healthcare access in underserved communities.

Today, the organization's work expands to multiple countries, including Uganda, Burundi, Nigeria, and Belize, where volunteers and partner organizations help provide food aid, medical care, schools, and vocational training programs.

"Wherever there's human need, we try to fill it," Ryer said.

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In addition to emergency relief efforts, Amigos Internacionales has increasingly focused on what Ryer described as sustainable, long-term community development through its "MissionPoint" initiative.

The program begins when a village donates land for development. From there, the organization works through a multi-step process that includes drilling water wells, building schools and churches, creating community gardens and offering vocational training programs.

The organization also teaches practical skills intended to help residents support themselves financially, including sewing, soap making, carpentry and masonry work.

“We’re trying to teach them to be better than themselves,” Ryer said. “I’m not trying to help them today or tomorrow. We want generational change.”

Ryer said the organization has also responded to humanitarian crises over the years, including disaster relief efforts and food distribution projects.

Since 2002, the nonprofit has distributed millions of meals in Guatemala through partnerships that include support from USAID. The organization also provided aid following volcanic disasters in the region by supplying emergency food to displaced residents.

Medical outreach

In recent years, the organization has expanded its medical outreach efforts in East Africa through a partnership with Doctors on Mission in Uganda.

Ryer said the medical teams travel into remote areas where residents often have little to no access to healthcare.

“We are literally going into the bush and doing medical clinics and medical camps,” Ryer said. “We’re doing surgeries such as dental, we’re doing eye cataracts. We’re turning our schoolrooms into surgical centers.”

In some regions where the organization operates, those school buildings are the only available structures large enough to support medical activity. Ryer said procedures are carried out with limited equipment and lighting, with doctors at times relying on flashlights to perform treatments that would normally take place in fully equipped hospitals.

During one recent children’s surgical camp, Ryer said teams completed 36 cleft palate surgeries in three days.

“You may not know how to help the child in Uganda that has a cleft palate,” he said. “… but through Amigos, I can show you and give you the opportunity to literally make a change in that child’s life.”

The organization is also preparing for additional surgical outreach efforts in northeastern Uganda, where Ryer said hundreds of children have been identified as needing procedures.

Education and anti-trafficking efforts

Education initiatives have become another major focus for the organization after leaders in Uganda described how children who could not afford school fees were often forced out of school.

Ryer said many vulnerable children, particularly girls, become targets for exploitation after being sent home from school.

“They’re so desperate to get money anyway, so they can get back to school, they’ll sell themselves and men in the village know this so they take advantage,” Ryer said. “But that’s how we got into this… I’ve wanted to fight sex trafficking, and that was how we were doing it.”

The organization has been working to support more than a thousand students across several schools in Uganda.

“If they’re in school,” they’re not being sex trafficked,” Ryer said.

The schools are also being provided meals and creating connections between donors and students through sponsorship programs and regular updates.

Different settings, different needs

Ryer said the organization’s focus on international work comes down to access and scale of need. While he acknowledged there are individuals and communities in need in the United States, he said many people still have relatively more pathways to care compared to those in remote regions overseas.

“There is so much opportunity for anybody here that really wants to get care, to get care,” he said. “There is not anyone here that would walk 100 kilometers to get to medical help… like it’s done in these underserved communities.”

He added that Amigos Internacionales has supported local efforts as well, including donating medical equipment to Bethesda Health Clinic in East Texas years ago and working with regional partners on trauma and mental health-related services.

Still, he said the scale of need in parts of Africa and other regions, combined with limited infrastructure, is what drives much of the organization’s international focus.

“There is need here,” he said. “But there is so much opportunity over there where there’s just no access.”

Continuing the Mission

Ryer has been involved with Amigos Internacionales since childhood, first becoming connected to the organization through its founder, Dr. John La Noue, in the late 1960s.

He later served in a variety of volunteer and leadership roles before being named president and CEO about 16 years ago, stepping into the organization’s top position after decades of involvement in both ministry and nonprofit work.

“I spent 47 years helping people,” he said. “Now I help people help people.”

The organization’s medical outreach relies heavily on volunteer doctors and medical professionals, most of whom are based in Uganda or other parts of East Africa, with additional volunteers traveling in from other countries. Participants often donate their time and, in many cases, cover their own travel and time away from work, while the organization provides lodging and meals during medical camps.

The nonprofit reported spending about $185,000 in a recent year while estimating approximately $10 million in medical services delivered, a figure it described as roughly $55 in medical value for every $1 contributed.

“You can see the difference in a literally changed life,” Ryer said.

Amigos Internacionales operates primarily through donations from individuals, churches, and foundations. According to Ryer, while some churches contribute through missions budgets, others support the organization through smaller recurring donations.

“I’ve got a little church of retired women,” he said. “They’re just barely surviving and they send me $100 every three months. That check means more than the $10,000 check because I know it’s the widow’s mite.”

Returning to East Texas

Although Amigos Internacionales’s work reaches across the globe, its headquarters recently returned to East Texas.

After relocating to the Tyler area to be closer to family, Ryer and his wife helped establish Amigos Internacionales’s headquarters in Whitehouse. Inside the office — located at 15632 Hwy 110 South, Suite 18 — is lined with photographs of the organization’s overseas work, from rebuilt school buildings in rural communities to before-and-after images of children following cleft palate surgeries.

“I want people to be able to come and see the work that we’re doing here,” Ryer said.

At 66 years old, Ryer said he still looks forward to coming into the office each day.

“I get image after image after image of people whose lives are being touched and changed,” he said. “It’s not hard to get excited about coming to work.”

To find out more about volunteer opportunities or how to support Amigos

Internacionales, visit www.amigosii.org.

ABOUT JENNIFER SCOTT

Multimedia reporter and animal lover on the education beat. I am an Alabama native with a bachelor's in journalism from Troy University. I've been married to my college sweetheart since 2012, and we have enjoyed living in East Texas since moving up from the Houston area in 2021. We love all things Disney and dogs!

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